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ABSTRACT

Asserting that the significance of Project work in the early childhood curriculum may not be just intellectual but, more importantly, may be related to dispositional development, this paper discusses why the Project Approach is important in early childhood education. The paper explores the intellectual and social benefits of the Project Approach and then discusses project work from a Deweyan perspective, as well as its relationship to the Reggio Emilia approach, constructivism, and the project method discussed by Kilpatrick early in the 20th century. (Author/HTH)

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The Project Approach as a Way of Making Life Meaningful in the Classroom

Eunju Yun

Abstract

This paper discusses why the Project Approach is important in early childhood education. The paper explores the intellectual and social benefits of the Project Approach and then discusses project work from a Deweyan perspective, as well as its relationship to the Reggio Emilia approach, constructivism, and the project method discussed by Kilpatrick early in the 20th century.

This paper discusses the importance of project work in the early childhood curriculum. The "why" of the Project Approach rather than the "what" and "how"—although they may be equally important—is the focus of this paper. The significance of project work in the curriculum may be not just intellectual but, more importantly, it may be related to dispositional development. Sustained engagement in project work, it seems, should dispose children toward the *habit* of meaningful pursuits as an element of the good life. In other words, project work may epitomize the Deweyan dictum that education itself should be characterized by meaningfulness and not merely preparation for life in the future.

Intellectual Aspects of Project Work

According to Katz and Chard (1989, p. 5), project work need not be all of the curriculum. Project work complements play, on the one hand, and academic learning, on the other. It is more formal than play in the earlier part of early childhood and more informal than systematic instruction in the later part of early childhood (Katz, 1994).

The Project Approach is *intellectual*—neither just playful nor merely academic (Katz & Chard, 1989, p. 4). Even very young children—whose business seems mostly to play—may well be up to intellectual learning, although systematic academic instruction may not yet be "appropriate" for them. They could perhaps be taught reading and writing, but in the course of academic instruction, their *disposition* toward later literate activities could be damaged (Katz, 1995, p. 64), perhaps beyond repair:

> For example, the risk of early instruction in beginning reading skills is that the amount of drill and practice required for success at an early age seems to undermine children's disposition to be readers. It is clearly not useful for a child to learn skills if, in the process of acquiring them, the disposition to use them is lost. In the case of reading in particular, comprehension is most likely to be dependent on actual reading and not just on skill-based reading instruction. (Katz, 1999, p. 2)

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Conventional reading and writing are not the only media of communication for children; younger children could well think and express their understanding through *graphic languages* and thus be intellectual, not merely playful. Again, according to Katz:

> The Reggio Emilia children's work suggested to me that many of us in the U.S. seriously underestimate preprimary school children's *graphical* [italics added] representational capabilities and the quality of *intellectual* [italics added] effort and growth it can stimulate. (Katz, 1993, pp. 20-21)

Children can exercise such intellectual virtues as creativity, critical thinking, and finer discrimination without recourse to conventional written language.

It goes without saying, of course, that if children in the earlier phase of early childhood should focus on intellectual activities, so should children in the later phase as well. However, the intellectual development of children in later years could be neglected for different reasons from those in the earlier phase. With older children, the curriculum could overemphasize systematic instruction, while with younger children, it could overemphasize spontaneous play. Academic work, as well as play, are best thought of as being enhanced by intellectual work.

Project work could also provide a context for the application of skills learned in systematic instruction (Katz & Chard, 1989, p. 11; Chard, 2000). Through project work, children in the later phase of early childhood could practice and strengthen their burgeoning skills of counting, measuring, reading, writing, and drawing as these skills are used to represent their ideas, theories, and findings related to the project topic.

Still another justification for project work, in relation to intellectual development, is the idea of curriculum integration (Katz & Chard, 1989, p. 6; Katz, 1994), which could be easily neglected in systematic instruction. In project work, the study of a topic could be approached from many different subject perspectives. The same understanding could be dramatized or expressed in drawings, songs, constructions, and so forth. The "web" of subtopics might also illustrate this dimension of project work.

Social Aspects of Project Work

Another rationale for the introduction of project work into early childhood education may be the development of a "community ethos" (Katz & Chard, 1989, p. 6). The benefits of project work may be social as well as intellectual:

> The classroom is a place where people can live a fulfilling life together as a community of learners if needs and concerns are appropriately expressed. Problems can be discussed. Support, encouragement, and models can be provided by both teacher and peers. Where expectations for children's learning are high it is important that the social interaction itself is designed to facilitate learning. (Chard, 2000)

The Project Approach may provide a natural context for this spirit of community, which systematic instruction could neglect or work against. During project work, "many processes and skills useful for participation in a democracy are applied: resolving conflicts, sharing responsibility for carrying out plans, making suggestions to one another, and so forth" (Katz & Chard, 1998).

Project Work as Meaningful Life

However, the benefits of project work may not just be intellectual and social. The importance of the Project Approach may be found as well in its significance as a practice of *living*. A project resembles a "real-life" situation more than play or systematic instruction does. A project may be a self-initiated *work* activity, and active cooperative participation, at the same time as being a *learning* activity. Not only could the project itself be meaningful but also a *practice* of—not merely a preparation for—that fulfilling life. Project work could be seen, in other words, as ontological or existential as well as intellectual or social. Ontological in the sense that an overarching attitude of living is at stake with the Project Approach, not merely a regional development of the intellect or the social, and existential in the sense that an authentic mode of being is strengthened through project work. The intellectual or the social could in effect be aspects of the existential or ontological.

Katz and Chard (1989, p. 6) seem to emphasize, in a Deweyan spirit, this existential dimension of the Project Approach this way: "The children's school experiences are real, daily life experiences; they are not a withdrawal from life, which is resumed only outside the school." Their life in the school, then, would have to approximate the fulfilling life of meaningfulness as far as possible; the children should be able to experience their work as meaningful. Project work may be particularly significant in this context. Through project work, children can not only improve their "understanding of the world around them" but also can "strengthen their dispositions to go on learning" for the rest of their lives (Katz & Chard, 1989, p. 5).

The Project Approach could thus be understood as emphasizing the educational philosophy of self-realization, as in Fenstermacher's classification of educational philosophies—that is, the "executive" (managerial or technical efficiency), the "liberationist" (generalist understanding), and the "therapist" (self-realization) (Fenstermacher & Soltis, 1986). The therapist emphasis seems to be essentially on learning *as living*, while the other two seem to be on learning of knowledge, technical or general, *for living*.

It seems that we do not have a sense of the existential in our historical understanding of educational theories. Rousseau, for example, might not have been concerned just with the meaningfulness of knowledge or thinking critically or creatively, in his emphasis on the concept of "nature." His concern might primarily have been with the inner life of children—of course, life according to their own nature and not in terms of comparing their own achievement to that of others. This seems what he means by *integral* life as opposed to the fractional one. Rousseau's education according to nature should thus be primarily existential or ontological rather than epistemological.

Dewey's use of the term "experience" is similarly ontological in meaning rather than epistemological. He does not seem primarily to emphasize the process of knowing versus knowledge as a product; he seems rather to emphasize the very process of living called learning. Learning was of course to be based on the experience of the child at a given time. But, in addition, he believed emphatically that learning itself should be a process of meaningful life or experience for learners. Knowledge acquisition should be dependent on this living. Learning is to be a practice of life, not merely for its preparation in terms of knowledge acquisition. Teachers were to be attentive, first of all, to the qualities of living called learning, according to Dewey. Interest, thinking, morals, creativity, etc., were primarily qualities of any good life, rather than merely conditions of knowing or its fruits.

Recent postmodern philosophies, such as phenomenology, hermeneutics, and existentialism, seem also to prioritize the ontological over the epistemological. They are "overcoming epistemology," (Taylor, 1995, chapter 1) or "post-epistemological" (Noddings, 1990, p. 7), so to speak. They emphasize situated or contextual understanding over disengaged or objective knowing. What is primary is "intention," "meaning," "embodiment," "engagement," "prejudgments," and "traditions"—i.e., "life-world."

The historical "project method" and the modern practices of the "Reggio Emilia approach" and "constructivist education" seem to share existential prioritization of the importance of the actual experiences provided by the Project Approach.

The Project Approach and Reggio Emilia

The Project Approach is similar to the Reggio Emilia approach in many respects, especially in its emphasis on project work in the cooperative context. Children's learning in Reggio Emilia is itself a meaningful life rather than mere learning activities. The children's project work around the "supermarket" (Katz, 1993) or the "poppies" drawing (Forman, 1993, pp. 144-145), for example, seems to embody real-life experiences full of meaning compared with typical schoolwork isolated from ordinary life. It may be because project work in Reggio Emilia is designed "to help very young make deeper and fuller sense of events and phenomena in their own environment and experience that are worthy of their attention" (Katz, 1993, p. 20). Their project work seems rather ontological, not merely epistemological.

We could assume that Reggio Emilia project topics based on "everyday objects and events are uninter-

esting. However, the work of preprimary schoolers in Reggio Emilia indicates that the processes of 'unpacking' or defamiliarizing everyday objects and events can be deeply meaningful and interesting to them" (Katz, 1993, p. 23). If the project topic is "exotic and outside of the children's direct experience," children would be "dependent upon the teacher for most of the questions, ideas, information, thinking, and planning" (Katz, 1993, p. 23).

Their activity could in this case be mere school learning. When the topic is familiar, however, children's participation would be more active and lively. Their life experience would be fuller and deeper.

The Project Approach and Constructivism

According to Forman (1993, p. 151), Katz and Chard's Project Approach could be taken to be constructive. But, for him, it would be a qualified constructivism because the Project Approach is not specific about children's "*endogenous*" (Forman, 1993, p. 138) construction of knowledge, although relying on their emerging interests. Constructivism, however, like the Project Approach, could be interpreted as a matter of life rather than epistemology.

Most of the constructivists in early childhood education seem oriented more epistemologically than ontologically (Forman, 1993; Kamii, 1991). But at a more philosophical level, constructivism could be ontological rather than epistemological. According to constructivism, our knowledge or understanding is not a context-free universal discovery; rather, it may inescapably be a context-specific situated construction, based on and for the context of experience or *living* (Rorty, 1989; von Glasersfeld, 1996). Knowledge may be from and for life; life may take precedence over knowledge here. Moreover, knowing is itself an important form of life for human beings, according to constructivism. Math and science are mathematiz*ing* and scienc*ing* at the same time, as human practices. It seems that learning in constructivism, as in the Project Approach, is itself actual life for children.

The Project Approach and the Project Method

According to Kilpatrick's well-known "project method," a project is characterized by whole-hearted purposefulness in a social context. For Kilpatrick, this purposefulness is among the most important components of a meaningful life. As he argues early in his famous paper "The Project Method," "the whole remaining discussion is but to support the contention here argued in advance, that education based on the purposeful act prepares best for life, while at the same time it constitutes the present worthy life itself" (Kilpatrick, 1918, p. 323). His ultimate justification of the project method seems to be predicated on the enhancement of life, not just on the meaningfulness of knowing something. Today's Project Approach may not be much different from the earlier project method in this respect.

Conclusion

This paper focused on the importance of project work in early childhood curriculum. The aspect of project work as a practice of *meaningful life* was especially singled out for emphasis, although the introduction of the Project Approach could well be justified for its intellectual emphasis and social ethos, among other benefits. The Reggio Emilia approach, constructivist education, and Kilpatrick's project method were taken to be similar to the Project Approach in this respect.

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